

THINKING ABOUT "PLACE" IN HELENA (Additional Walking Guide Detail)

One way to think about "sense of place" is to think of it as our sense of a number of more distinct ingredients, working together, as in a recipe, to make an overall impression. *Here is some more information about some of the ingredients I find working for us in Helena.*

*****QUESTION: Do you see these ingredients coming into play in any of the neighborhoods or streets of Helena? If so, how? Where? Are there other ingredients of "place" that you think should be on this list? What are those and what experiences in Helena inspire you to add these to the list?**

TOPOGRAPHY

Distant, within walking distance, and underfoot, Helena's topography always asserts itself. A distant rim of strong landforms (Sleeping Giant, Big Belt, Skihi, etc.) gives us our bearings in more than the merely directional sense. It wakens memories and suggests possibilities. Within walking distance, Mount Helena and the South Hills, always present, crowd and shape the town from two sides. Underfoot, the lay of the land is always entertaining -- giving us, among other things, a narrow crooked Main Street, Reeder's Alley, and all sorts of fun vantage points and places to walk.

TIME

The temporal element works on at least two scales. There's historic time, our human history as present in our older architecture and urban layout (Reeder's Alley, Downtown, etc.), and deep (geologic) time present in our eloquent bedrock exposures and entertaining topography.

HUMAN PRESENCE

This presence, again, is felt in several ways. Most obviously, there's "street life" -- folks on foot mixing outdoors, a universally recognized essential ingredient of urban "place". Then there's what might be called "artisanal presence", the presence of craftsmen, builders, designers, etc. as felt in the presence of their work -- architectural detail, for example, as employed to help create a setting for street life (think of Main Street); or the plain, legible workmanship at Reeder's Alley.

SCALE

This might best be thought of as our sense of physical position relative to the "stuff of place" suggested by those previous three ingredients. Are we "there", on foot, in the midst of it all, or are we riding through in a vehicle? Is "place" near enough to touch, or are we seeing it from a distance? I'll argue (as an old urban planner) that urban "place," to the extent that it evokes a sense of historic time and ongoing human presence (both kinds) must be scaled for walking. It

depends on a sense of walkable proximity. It's pulled together by walkable sightlines. This gets complicated of course. Distant topography for example, not within walking distance, plays its place-making role by visual juxtaposition with the nearby stuff. Walkable sightlines usually involve a distant view. Walkable scale is key, but the whole range of scale is at play in urban "sense of place."

COMPLEXITY

This is the quality which engages curiosity and imagination and a pedestrian's freedom to explore and engage. At best it's a fine-grained mix of (at least) the four ingredients listed above. It's the stuff of walkable sightlines.

PECULIARITY

This happens when the ingredients come together in such a way as to evoke a sense that what we're seeing or walking through exists here and nowhere else.